

# On Your Mark, Get Set, Start Your Grill:

## Tips to get your equipment ready for cookout season.

By Jason Capps

The days are getting longer, trees are budding and the tulips are beginning to emerge from their winter hibernation. It's time to start thinking about getting that grill ready for the season ahead. For most of us, this ritual marks the beginning of warmer weather and easier living. It's hard to beat the taste of fresh grilled vegetables accompanied by a juicy steak, but before you drop that Ribeye on the grill there are some crucial steps you must take to get it in tip-top shape.

Food just doesn't taste the way it should when it's cooked in the remnants of last season's meal. Even if you gave your grill a good cleaning before you put it away last year, follow these simple steps to keep your food looking and tasting great. Most of us have self-cleaning ovens, so kill two birds with one stone by placing your grill racks inside your oven and setting it on self-clean.

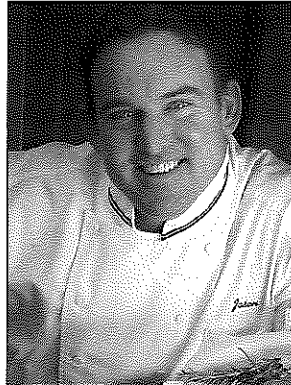
If the racks are caked with excessive amounts of food or grease, simply turn the heat to high on your grill and close the cover for a few minutes. Next, brush both sides of your racks with a stiff wire brush. You can also make a paste with baking soda and water, let it set for an hour, and scrub away.

Once your grill racks are clean, spritz with non-stick pan spray or rub with cooking oil. Putting barbecue sauce on your food only when it's nearly done will further help keep your grill racks clean. Explore marinades and rubs for added flavor and moisture. For grilled fish, a super hot grill will prevent sticking. Turn the heat down slightly just prior to adding the fish to prevent charring or flame up.

For extra insurance, put a few thin slices of lemon on your grill grate, place the fish on top. You may sacrifice some of the grill marks on the fish, but you will maintain the great grilled flavor with the added kick of the fresh lemon.

Inside of the grill, below the grates, remove lava rocks and spray with no-heat oven cleaner. Let it sit overnight, then hose off in the morning and replace with new lava rocks. Use a bent paper clip to poke through every burner hole. Always remember to turn off the gas valve (at the propane tank) once you're finished grilling and cover your grill once it has cooled down. This will keep it looking nice for next time.

After you've cleaned your grill, why not spend an afternoon organizing your kitchen and pantry? These often overlooked areas in your household are probably screaming for attention. Hey, bottled herbs have feelings, too! They also have a shelf life. After about one year, dried herbs lose their flavor and pungency.



Most bottles do not have an expiration date, so take a permanent marker and write your date of purchase on it. That way you'll know when it's time to refresh your supply. If you're not sure how old your spices or dried herbs are, you're probably better off throwing them away.

The same basic rules apply to kitchen gadgets. We all have a few things tucked away in our kitchen drawers that haven't seen the light of day in years. Spend some time taking inventory of what you use on a regular basis. That old carbon-steel peeler can still get the job done, but today's models come in every shape and color imaginable and they have ergonomic handles that feel good in your hand. Try replacing those warped rubber spatulas with the newer, high-tech, high-heat version. These are amazing cooking tools that can withstand heat up to 500 degrees and save your non-stick pans too! Popular with chefs for decades now, mandolins have become economical and safe for the home user. Stainless wire mesh strainers of various sizes are nice to have as well. No kitchen is complete without a set of oversized stainless mixing bowls.

So after a delicious dinner on the grill, why not whip up a fantastic dessert with some of your new kitchen tools? Try something different and unexpected this time and surprise your family. You know what they say: Spring is the time for new beginnings! Ciao!

Jason Capps is the chef/owner of Greco's Gourmet Catering in McMurray. He hosts cooking classes once a year, including a grilling/microbeer class on April 27, 2005, and caters for all occasions. In 2006, he will open Bella Sera by Greco's, a newly constructed, full service banquet facility. Feel free to contact him via email or phone with any of your culinary related questions. Visit [www.grecosgourmet.com](http://www.grecosgourmet.com) or call (724) 942-9500.